

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN SIGERSON

Performing Mozart's *Requiem*

EIR interviewed Schiller Institute Director John Sigerson on Sept. 20, 2016.

EIR: How did your approach to directing and balancing the orchestra and chorus in the *Requiem* differ from that which we often hear as the approach to Mozart's work in locations such as the "Mostly Mozart" performed at Lincoln Center?

John Sigerson: It's been many years since I've listened to Mostly Mozart at Lincoln Center, so I don't wish to say anything about that particular ensemble today. But I will say that ever since the 1980s, I've noticed a marked shift in the attitude of many professional string players in how they believe they are expected to play works of Mozart and other composers of his era. Instead of the rich, passionate bowstrokes typified by Lyndon LaRouche's friend Norbert Brainin, who led the Amadeus Quartet for so many years, string players began to believe what was required of them for Mozart, was shorter bowstrokes and very little vibrato, a practice which tends to destroy the beautiful legato line which is the hallmark of great *bel canto* singing.

At the same time, what I can fairly describe as a false dichotomy developed between "instrumental" and "vocal" performance. In his written works, LaRouche has often inveighed against the absurdity of this dichotomy, and has rightly insisted that the fount of all Classical performance is the well-trained *bel canto* singing voice. What he said resonated with me personally, too, because in my student time at Juilliard, I was fortunate enough to study with the great contrabass soloist Gary Karr, who insisted that even on that seemingly grumbly instrument, one must sing passionately and expressively, and not just saw away at the notes.

This kind of dichotomy goes even further back to the conflict between Wilhelm Furtwängler and Arturo Toscanini regarding the relationship of the musician to



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John Sigerson conducting the Schiller Institute Chorus performance of Mozart's Requiem at the St. Joseph Co-Cathedral in Brooklyn, N.Y. on Sept. 11, 2016.

the musical score. Whereas Toscanini insisted that his purpose was to interpret as exactly as possible what is in the written score, Furtwängler countered that the performer must always strive to re-create the work in such a way that listeners are drawn into the mind of its creator, and that therefore the performance must focus not so much on the notes themselves, as what is "behind the notes." And of course, I am on Furtwängler's side on that.

EIR: How did the Sunday performance, embedded in the Catholic liturgy, differ from the others?

Sigerson: What we planned jointly with the Co-Cathedral of St. Joseph in Brooklyn on Sunday, September 11 was in fact a unique experiment, integrating the Mozart *Requiem* with a Sunday Catholic Mass. The Requiem Mass service is generally never performed on Sunday, and so in the course of a number of meetings with Msgr. Kieran Harrington, the Parish Rector of the Cathedral, we fashioned a sequence which was congenial to the performance requirements of our chorus and orchestra, while it adhered to the liturgical requirements at the same time.

One question that immediately came up in those discussions, was the *Requiem*'s lack of a "Gloria" section as required by the liturgy. This I solved by inserting a "Gloria" from one of Mozart's earlier masses, namely his *Missa Brevis in D minor*, which is in the same key and mode as the *Requiem*. And it came as a nice, not so surprising surprise, that at the very end of this little "Gloria," Mozart inserts a little proto-fugal theme which foreshadows the *Requiem*'s main "Kyrie eleison" fugal subject—which, in turn, harks back to J.S. Bach's and Handel's magnificent work with this same theme.

Transparency and Tuning

EIR: How did the C=256 tuning change the transparency exhibited in the performances?

Sigerson: Just to be clear: We performed at the "Verdi tuning" of A=432 Hz, which is slightly higher than the A=430.5 Hz required for setting Middle C at exactly 256 Hz. Both of these slightly different tunings work fine with the vocal registration that Verdi was concerned about, however I have tended to stick with A=432 Hz because it's marginally easier to get an orchestra with modern instruments to play at that pitch. For example, in our performance the clarinets were right at their limit, and I doubt they could have played in tune even one cycle lower. As far as transparency is concerned, we are still at the very start of being able to construct an orchestra that can play really well and



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The Schiller Institute Chorus, accompanying orchestra, and Conductor John Sigerson at the St. Joseph Co-Cathedral in Brooklyn.

easily on modern instruments (that is, not "period" instruments) at the Verdi tuning. We still have a great number of technological problems to solve in this regard, and until they are solved, everything is quite experimental.

But as for the chorus, there is definitely greater transparency, not only because the vocal registration "works" (even though many singers in the chorus are only half aware of where their registers sit), but because there is a certain "ease" or "rightness" which sets in once singers become accustomed to singing at this tuning. And this ease of delivery results in greater transparency—and a lot more fun!

EIR: Is there in fact any appreciable difference, any difference which is important, between the first sections of the *Requiem*, and those composed by Franz Süssmayr after Mozart's death?

Sigerson: For anyone who has seriously studied this work, there is a definite difference between the genius shown in the sections by Mozart, and the respectfully workmanlike completions by Süssmayr. For me personally, the difference becomes most palpable in that indescribable moment where Mozart, near death, breaks off after the first bars of the "Lacrymosa," which had to be completed by Süssmayr only based on Mozart's verbal indications.

Another example is the "Benedictus." As beautiful as Süssmayr's composition of this section is, I can't

help thinking that had Mozart been able to compose it, it would have had something much more profound, perhaps foreshadowing the incredible “Benedictus” of Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis*.

EIR: There was a notable difference in the attack delivered at the very beginning of the *Requiem* performances, and there was also a significant difference in how you conducted and how the chorus sang sections such as the “Lacrymosa.” Why was that?

Sigerson: The opening back-and-forth in the strings has to evoke the deliberately slow, solemn, somewhat hesitant steps as one enters the cathedral to participate in the *Requiem*. Both the tempo and the slightly lengthened bowstrokes must reflect that. I almost succeeded in getting this, but lack of rehearsal time prevented me from getting exactly what I wanted. The “Lacrymosa” is so emotionally compelling, that I concluded that a thunderous “Amen” at the end—which is the way it is commonly done—tends to undermine the total effect. “Calming down” the ending “Amen” has the effect of allowing us to wipe away the tears that inevitably flow if we allow ourselves to be moved.

The *Requiem*, the Spirituals, and *Messiah*

EIR: How did you think the combination of African-American spirituals, Mozart’s *Requiem*, and selections from Handel’s *Messiah* worked?

Sigerson: Diane Sare, who conducted those pieces, is committed to reviving the *correct* performance of these spirituals, many of which were arranged by collaborators of Antonin Dvorak during his extended stay in the United States. They are a crucial, Classical antidote to “gospel” singing’s tendency to drift into banality and plain bad singing. Similar to the German *Lied* for German-speakers, these spirituals strike a deep chord in the soul, with their assertion of the fundamental distinction between man and beast. And for these reasons, they fit perfectly with our intention with the *Mozart Requiem*.

As for Handel, Mozart venerated the man, as did Beethoven, and even made an arrangement of *Messiah* to suit Viennese tastes. I don’t think he would have any problem adding Handel’s great D major “Amen” chorus at the end of Mozart’s own unfinished work in D minor. After all, Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony works the same way, beginning in D minor and ending the final “Ode to Joy” movement with a tumultuous D major.

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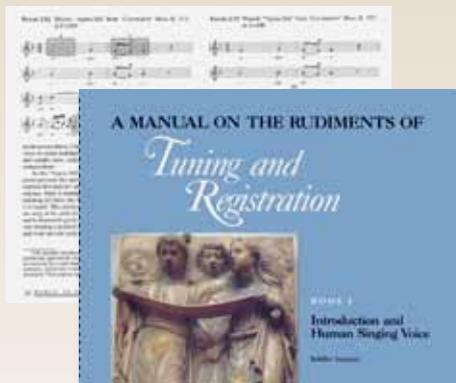
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